



Fulton, H. (2017). Caerleon and Cultural Memory in the Modern Literature of Wales. In A. Ahlqvist, & P. O'Neill (Eds.), *Germano-Celtica: A Festschrift for Brian Taylor* (pp. 101-119). (Sydney Series in Celtic Studies). Sydney University Press.

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# Caerleon and Cultural Memory in the Modern Literature of Wales

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IN his Modernist poem, ‘The Sleeping Lord’, written in 1967, David Jones (1895–1974) identifies the sleeping King Arthur with the whole of south Wales, imagining him embedded inside the land itself, so that the idea of Arthur is inseparable from the topography of the south Welsh valleys. In a piece of detailed ekphrasis, Jones talks us through the visual image he has conjured up of this legend in the landscape:

Is the Usk a drain for his gleaming tears  
who weeps for the land  
    who dreams his bitter dream  
for the folk of the land  
does Tawe clog for his sorrows  
do the parallel dark-seam drainers  
    mingle his anguish-stream  
with the scored valleys’ tilted refuse.  
Does his freight of woe  
    flood South by East  
on Sirhywi and Ebwy  
    is it southly bourn  
on double Rhondda’s fall to Taff?  
(Jones 1974, 91–92)

While his legs and ankles stretch out to Carmarthen in the west, Arthur’s head lies in the east, where his tears form the rivers that flow south down to the Severn, the whole image forming an anthropomorphised map of Wales, wherein Arthur weeps for a land despoiled by the ‘tilted refuse’ of the modern coal and steel industries. Damien Walford Davies has written recently about the importance of cartography in defining the Welshness of Welsh writing in English (2012, 5), and this description of the sleeping Arthur, the weeping Arthur, is mapped on to the rivers of south Wales in such a way that metaphor is articulated as physical geography.

What is hinted at on this figurative map by David Jones, but not actually mentioned, is the old Roman city of Caerleon where, according to medieval legend, King Arthur had his main court. Caerleon, still bearing today the remains of the Roman settlement which dominated the landscape in the first century AD, sits on the river Usk, just where Jones imagines Arthur's head to be, with his tears pouring down the valleys. In the psychogeography of Jones's work, where Rome habitually features as a metonym for his Catholic faith, Arthur's resting place in the valleys is a reminder of the old Roman empire within which Wales was a rampart of the island of Britain. Now all is lost: the rivers and valleys of south Wales, once home to Arthur, the great British general and emperor of Rome, have become waste lands, pitted by coal mines and steel works, and Arthur, locked into the very fabric of the land, weeps for the loss of his past.

David Jones's nostalgia is symptomatic of a distinctive twentieth-century sensibility among writers of Wales regarding the imagined authenticity of its rural landscapes. The 'real Wales' as it is commonly represented in literary texts is not urban and industrial but rural and pastoral; therefore the physical presence of urban Wales, especially after the industrial expansions of the nineteenth century, has to be negotiated in relation to dominant images of a timeless and enduring landscape. M. Wynn Thomas has associated this myth of landscape particularly with Welsh-language writers, saying that 'Welsh-language society has tended to recycle a whole set of complacent complementary myths about itself, most of which tie it firmly to rural life' (Thomas 1999, 64), but, as Thomas goes on to explore, myths of landscape and anxieties of industrialism are articulated in both languages. What seems to be a common factor is that industrialism is regarded as a modern blight imposed from outside Wales (mainly from England) whereas the pastoral landscape seems to offer a direct link to an ancient and more authentic past.

These myths and anxieties are particularly resonant in relation to the town of Caerleon, occupying an ambiguous space on the borders between Wales and England, between country and city, and on the continuum between the Roman imperial history of Britain and its industrial present. Located just beyond the urban growth of the modern valley towns, embedded in the river valley of the Usk above the Severn estuary, the town is romanticised by both Welsh and

English writers of Wales as memorial to a pre-industrial landscape and as witness to the authentic history of pre-Saxon Britain, a history that has to be constantly reclaimed from the dominant narrative of English imperialism. Literary references to Arthur at Caerleon are, like David Jones's writing about Wales, invariably nostalgic and valedictory, placing the loss of Arthur's imperial legacy in the context of modern industrialism and English colonialism.

Acclaimed by Geoffrey of Monmouth, the twelfth-century historian, as the site of King Arthur's court, Caerleon functioned in medieval literature as a symbol of Roman imperialism that was passed on, via Arthur, to the Norman, English, and Tudor monarchies. In the Welsh Arthurian prose romances of the thirteenth century, particularly *Owein, neu Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynnawn* ('Owain, or the Lady of the Fountain') and *Chwedl Gereint ab Erbin* ('The Tale of Geraint son of Erbin'), Arthur's court is located at Caerleon, as it is in some of the English chronicles (for example, the fourteenth-century *Alliterative Morte Arthure*) and in Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century epic, the *Morte Darthur*. In these texts, Caerleon is understood as a Roman rather than a Welsh city, inherited by Arthur as the centre of a new British empire under the English kings.

For modern writers of Wales in the twentieth century, Caerleon's symbolism is more problematic. Its Roman and Arthurian past, located in a distant landscape, is invariably set in poignant contrast to its industrial present as a small town close to the ravaged landscape of the coalfields. This nostalgia for landscape and imperial authority is particularly evident in David Jones's poetry (and in much of his art), but it also features in the work of other modern writers who contemplate the small town of Caerleon and its rich history. Such literary works cluster around the timeframe of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, just at the moment when industrialism was bringing about the greatest changes to the topography and culture of south Wales; this chronological coincidence underlines the memorial significance of Caerleon whose visible decline from Roman grandeur, signified by its ruins, prefigures its modern economic and topographical decline.

This essay argues that cultural recuperations of the *romanitas* of pre-Saxon Wales function as an antidote to contemporary anxieties of industrialism. By *romanitas* I mean not so much the Romans

themselves, as the occupiers of early Britain, but rather the perceived legacy of their presence in the physical landscape and the intellectual traditions of the Britain they left behind. Whether expressed implicitly or explicitly, this legacy is found embedded in post-Roman literary texts as part of an imagined past which helps to make sense of the present. The significance of Caerleon for modern writers of Wales is that it provides a focus for literary nostalgia about lost landscapes in the specific context of urbanisation and industrial growth in Wales before and after 1900.

Caerleon has been a fairly frequent point of reference in the literary writing of Wales since Geoffrey of Monmouth, indicating its functionality as a literary symbol evoking a range of emotions and attitudes to the history of landscape and power in Wales. The examples brought together in this essay come from different contexts—David Jones as a comparative outsider, W. H. Davies as the inheritor of English pastoralism, A. G. Prys-Jones as a cultural nationalist, and T. Gwynn Jones as a Welsh-language writer—but they share a common emotion of nostalgia for a Wales now lost to English industrialism. The significance of Rome is understood slightly differently by each of these writers, but all acknowledge the importance of Rome in the history of Wales and the formation of the Welsh nation.

#### ROMAN CAERLEON AND ENGLISH IMPERIALISM

Though it had become by the mid-twentieth century a fairly small and unremarkable town just to the north of the M4 motorway above Newport, Caerleon is one of the oldest settlements in Wales and the site of one of the largest Roman fortresses in the country (Grimes 1935; Manning 2004, 189–201). Built as a new fortress in c. 76 A.D. to replace an earlier one at Usk, Caerleon, known to the Romans as Isca, was the last remaining stronghold in Gwent. It was garrisoned by the Second Legion Augusta, who moved there from Gloucester, and was continually occupied until the late third century. Not strictly a town but a military stronghold, Caerleon, whose name is derived from the Latin *castra legionis*, ‘city of the legion’, was among a number of

Roman garrisons in Wales which became the nuclei of later towns, such as Carmarthen and Caernarfon.<sup>1</sup>

The fortress at Caerleon originally comprised a very substantial set of buildings, including a large amphitheatre and a baths. In the Middle Ages, these buildings were already in ruins, forming one of the many reminders of Britain's Roman past which medieval historians regularly invoked as memorials to the past glories of the island. With the coming of the Normans to Britain, Caerleon as a border town was an early casualty to the expansionist activities of the Norman Marcher lords (Lieberman 2008, 18–33). For most of the Middle Ages, Caerleon was less a Welsh town than a Marcher town, absorbed into the economic interests of the Norman and then English lords who used the March of Wales as a military base and a source of revenue.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Caerleon was among the Norman lordships owned by the Clare family of Glamorgan, the earls of Gloucester, and it then passed to the Mortimer family, the earls of March, in the fourteenth century (Davies 1978, 36, 55). During these centuries of Norman and then English occupation, marked by occasional counter-raids by the Welsh, the fortress ruins were further destroyed, partly so that the stone could be re-used for Norman castles and partly, no doubt, to discourage the Welsh.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Harold Carter identified three types of settlement in Wales 'which could have acted as pre-urban nuclei' (1966, 3): the Roman camps, the monasteries, and the primary seats of the native princes. He points out that the only 'true' Roman town in Wales was at Caerwent, though he adds that Caerleon is the only example in Wales of a Roman fort influencing the subsequent plan of the town that emerged (p. 6). For a diagram of the street plan of Caerleon showing its Roman origins, see Soulsby (1983). Caerleon is, confusingly, also the Welsh name given to the English city of Chester, another legionary town; the former is sometimes distinguished from the latter by the name 'Caerllion-ar-Wysg', or Caerleon-on-Usk.

<sup>2</sup> The Welsh made several attempts, some of them successful, to re-take Caerleon but these were short-lived. It is possible that a Welsh raid by Morgan ab Owain in 1136 in which Richard de Clare was killed and Caerleon was taken motivated Geoffrey of Monmouth to place Arthur's court there as a warning to the Normans about the threat of the Welsh, but it is also likely that Geoffrey was making a point (serious or mischievous) about the supposed status of Caerleon as a metropolitan see under Archbishop Dubricius. See Gillingham (1990); Howell (2012); Brooke (1976).

fortress baths, for example, were demolished in the early thirteenth century following a Welsh uprising which ended in 1217 when the Normans re-captured Caerleon following a siege (Howell 2012, 18). By the end of the Middle Ages, very little of the Roman ruins were left.

It was Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing in the early decades of the twelfth century, who first brought Arthur and Rome together in the city of Caerleon.<sup>3</sup> In his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, ‘History of the Kings of Britain’ (c. 1138), Geoffrey took the original step of claiming Caerleon as the location of the court of his favourite British king, Arthur. Coming to power in the aftermath of the Roman withdrawal from Britain, and fresh from his triumphs against the Saxons, Irish, Norwegians, and Gauls, Arthur holds a Whitsun feast to which all the great and good of his empire are invited. Caerleon is the place chosen for this great event and Geoffrey describes the city as he imagined it might have been in its days of imperial glory, employing the formal rhetoric of the classical *encomium urbis*, ‘praise of the city’, to describe its location, topography, wealth, water supply, public buildings, and churches. Using the existing Roman ruins as his starting point, Geoffrey imagines Caerleon as a site of religious and political pre-eminence, containing both an archbishopric and a British royal palace, a microcosm of empire:

Indicato autem familiaribus suis quod affectauerat, consilium cepit ut in Vrbe Legionum suum exequeretur propositum. In Glamorgantia etenim super Oscam fluuium non longe a Sabrino mari amoeno situ locata, prae ceteris ciuitatibus diuitiarum copiis abundans tantae sollempnitati apta erat. Ex una namque parte praedictum nobile flumen iuxta eam fluebat, per quod transmarini reges et principes qui uenturi erant nauigio aduchi poterant. Ex alia uero parte pratis atque nemoribus uallata, regalibus praepollebat palaciis ita ut aureis tectorum fastigiis Romam imitaretur. Duabus autem eminebat ecclesiis, quarum una, in honore Iulii martiris erecta, uirgineo dicatarum choro perpulchre ornabatur, alia quidem, in beati Aaron eiusdem socii nomine fundata, canonicorum conuentu subnixa, terciam metropolitanam sedem Britanniae habebat.

(Reeve & Wright 2007, 209–211)

<sup>3</sup> On the political ideology of Geoffrey’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1138), see Gillingham (2000); Ashe (2007).

He [Arthur] put his plan to his advisors, who suggested that the celebrations be held at Caerleon. The superior wealth of Caerleon, admirably positioned on the river Usk not far from the mouth of the Severn in Glamorgan, made it the most suitable of all cities for such a ceremony. On one side there flowed a noble river, on which could be brought by boat the kings and princes visiting from overseas. On the other, it was surrounded by meadows and woods, and so fine were its royal palaces that the gold that decked their roofs reminded one of Rome. Site of the third metropolitan see of Britain, it boasted two churches, one of which, in honour of the martyr Julius, was distinguished by a convent of devout nuns, and the other, dedicated to his companion Aaron, housed a group of canons.  
(Reeve & Wright 2007, 208)

It is here in Roman Caerleon that Arthur holds court and celebrates his coronation as king of Britain and hero of the wars against the Romans. By placing Arthur's court there, in the aftermath of the Roman withdrawal from Britain in the fifth century, Geoffrey engages with the ambiguity of Caerleon as the site of a British imperial greatness that was inherited not by the Welsh but by the Normans and, after them, the English. As Robert Rouse has said of this description, 'Caerleon here is both reminder of and challenger to the glory of Rome, that inescapable spectre of Empire for the medieval European historical imagination. Geoffrey's work here entails a *translatio imperii* ['transfer of imperial power'] figuring Caerleon as a new imperial centre, a replacement for Rome, just as Arthur replaces Rome's power and heritage' (Rouse 2013, 42). What Rouse misses is that Geoffrey's *translatio imperii* also involves the transfer of Caerleon from Wales into an English kingdom governed by the Normans. The romantic history of Caerleon that leads to the English appropriation of Roman imperialism begins with Geoffrey's account.

From its very beginnings, then, right up to the incorporation of Wales by the Acts of Union in the sixteenth century, Caerleon was an instrument of foreign control in the landscape of Wales. Its ruins, its location on the borders and its history as a Roman, Saxon, Norman and then English town worked to elide its geographical Welshness and to identify it as a material monument to the colonisation of the March. At the same time, Caerleon as a Marcher town was projected by medieval and early modern writers as an imagined space where colonisers and colonised could acknowledge a shared cultural history



focused on the figure of King Arthur. The Welsh romance, *Gereint vab Erbin*, ‘Geraint son of Erbin’ (Thomson 1997), follows Geoffrey’s lead in describing the magnificence of Arthur’s court at Caerleon:

Arthur a deuodes dala llys yg Kaerllion ar Vysc, ag y dellis ar un tu seith Pasc a phymp Nadolic. A’r Sulgwyn treilgweith dala llys a oruc yno, canys hygyrchaf lle yn y gyuoeth oyd Gaerllion y ar uor ac y ar dir. A dygyuor a oruc attaw naw brenhin corunawc a oedynt wyr itaw hyd yno; a chyt a hynny ieirll a barwneit, canys gwahodwyr itaw uydei y rei hynny ym pob gwyl arbennic ony bei uawr aghennyon yn eu lludyas. A phan uei ef yg Kaerllion yn dala llys, teir eglwys ar dec a achubid vrth y offerenneu.

(Thomson 1997, 1)

It was Arthur’s custom to hold court at Caerllion ar Wysg, and he held it there continually for seven Easters and five Christmasses. Once upon a time he held court there at Whitsuntide, for Caerllion was the most accessible place in his territory, by sea and by land. He gathered about him there nine crowned kings who were vassals of his, and with them earls and barons, because these would be his guests at every high feast unless pressure of circumstances prevented them. Whenever he was at Caerllion holding court, thirteen churches would be taken up with his Masses.

(Davies 2007, 139)

The Welsh author of this text has followed Galfridian tradition in locating Arthur’s court at Caerleon but has tried to reappropriate it as part of the literal topography of the Welsh March.<sup>4</sup> The attempt is only partially successful—we are reminded that the actual town of Caerleon exists as a place on the river Usk, but it is still presented here through the Galfridian discourse of the March, an ambiguous space where supernatural events take place. This is the discourse of institutional control, ventriloquized by Welsh writers in order to align themselves and their patrons with the cultural power of the Marcher lords.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur’s court is also located at Caerleon in the other two Welsh romances, *Owein, neu Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynnawn*, (‘Owain, or the Tale of the Lady of the Fountain’) and *Peredur*, the story of the Grail hero. Roger Middleton suggested that this description at the beginning of *Gereint* may have drawn directly on Geoffrey’s description of Caerleon in the *Historia* (Middleton 1995, 150).

The mid-nineteenth century saw the beginnings of serious archaeological excavation at Caerleon, much of it done by English antiquarians dedicated to retrieving Britain's Roman past (Hoselitz 2007, 81–94).<sup>5</sup> Their initial work led to the founding of a small museum at Caerleon and the preservation of as much of its Roman heritage as was still left, creating a modest tourist centre that appealed to English visitors seeking affirmation of their imperial past amidst the novelty of Wales's landscapes. The ruins were more extensively excavated in the early twentieth century, and the amphitheatre, what is left of it, is the only fully-excavated example of a Roman amphitheatre in Britain (Boon 1973).

This colonial English appropriation of Caerleon was nourished by a romantic imaginary which sought autochthonous landscapes as an antidote to urban industrial powerhouses. The essential paradox of Caerleon, existing both in the political present of an exploited industrial Wales and in a nostalgic Arthurian past, was invoked by Alfred Lord Tennyson, who did more than any writer in English since Thomas Malory to remove Arthur from his Welsh past and absorb him into a dominant narrative of English pre-eminence. We know that Tennyson stayed for a few nights at the Hanbury Arms hotel in Caerleon in 1856 while he was writing some of the Arthurian poems that were later included in *Idylls of the King* (1874). On September 16, Tennyson wrote to his wife Emily Sellwood Tennyson: 'The Usk murmurs by the windows and I sit like King Arthur at Caerleon [...] This is a most quiet, half-ruined village of about 1500 inhabitants with [a] little museum of Roman tombstones and other things' (Tennyson 1987, 159).<sup>6</sup> Using the Arthurian sublime to comment on the modern reality, Tennyson views Caerleon as a memorial to Roman and Arthurian histories, now safely incorporated into an English cultural empire.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Hoselitz (2007, 51) argues that Geoffrey's story of Arthur's court at Caerleon was 'constructed, at least in part, for nationalistic purposes', though I do not entirely agree with her implication that Geoffrey was supporting Welsh claims to Caerleon at that time.

<sup>6</sup> On Tennyson's visit to Caerleon, see Barber (1996).

<sup>7</sup> A similar English colonial appropriation of the Welsh landscape is evident in the work of other nineteenth-century poets such as William Wordsworth, for whom

The value of Caerleon as a tourist destination, embodying both scenic beauty and the cultural heritage of England, was emphasised by early travel writers such as A. G. Bradley. In his account of travelling around the March of Wales published in 1905, at the height of the industrial revolution in south Wales, Bradley describes Caerleon like this:

Caerleon is five miles by train from [Newport], and I had singled it out as the one spot in this west Monmouth country that could not possibly be overlooked. It is a place suited rather to reflection, when you have got over the shock of seeing its name on a station notice board, than to description, unless as a purely antiquarian subject. It is virtually all prehistoric; part Roman, part legendary; hallowed by bards and poets for centuries [...] The seat of King Arthur and his round table, the centre of Christianity in West Britain, the head quarters of the Romans in this part of the island, and the barracks of the second legions, it is now but a straggling agricultural village, secluded from industrial smoke and disfigurement...  
(Bradley 1905, 362)

Here is the paradox of Caerleon, whose physical presence represents both a colonised present and a nostalgic transcendent otherness. The traveller seeks it out because of its legendary history and historical ruins, but its rustic village appearance, symptomatic of its Welshness, is a disappointment; it is located away from industrial disfigurement, and yet the railway goes right to its door, creating a ‘shock’ when the name is observed on the station board. An English modernity in the form of industrialisation has come to Caerleon, creating a peculiarly English nostalgia for the imperial past of ‘West Britain’.

#### CAERLEON IN MODERN WRITING OF WALES

For poets in Wales writing about Caerleon around the beginning of the twentieth century, their nostalgia is for an imaginary past in which the

‘Wales as a national or political entity did not loom large’ (Prothero 2013, 13) but who set a number of his poems in Wales, including ‘The Egyptian Maid’ which uses Caerleon as a Roman and Arthurian point of reference (Wordsworth 1835, 47–68). For other examples see Kennerley (1971).

Roman empire gave birth to a distinctive Welsh identity. The value of Caerleon lies in its visible links with empire and its consequent power to authorise an authentically Welsh history, separate from that of England, which is at the core of Welsh identity. In an early poem by W. H. Davies (1871–1940), ‘Days that have Been’, published in 1911, Caerleon is a memorial to the poet’s own not-too-distant past as a young man inspired to write poetry by the countryside around him. The urban qualities of Caerleon and other villages of Gwent are entirely removed, leaving a sense only of a romantic landscape:

Can I forget the sweet days that have been,  
When poetry first began to warm my blood;  
When from the hills of Gwent I saw the earth  
Burned into two by Severn’s silver flood;

When I would go alone at night to see  
The moonlight, like a big white butterfly,  
Dreaming on that old castle near Caerleon;  
While at its side the Usk went softly by...

[...] Can I forget the sweet days that have been,  
The villages so green I have been in;  
Llantarnam, Magor, Malpas, and Llanwern,  
Liswery, old Caerleon, and Alteryyn?  
(W. H. Davies 1911, 23–4)

In this poem, Caerleon is part of Davies’s own personal cartography, a favourite memorial on the map of his past. There is no mention of train tracks or stations, no hint that by 1911 these villages were on the edge of the coalfields. The Gwent landscape has to be as innocent of corruption as Davies’s memory of his youth. Yet the stain of corruption by English industrialisation is implicit in this nostalgia for an authentic past. Reading the poem, we know that the Caerleon of Davies’s boyhood has already been compromised by the modern world; yet for Davies, old Caerleon, that is, pre-industrial Caerleon, bears witness to Wales’s ancient landscape and its links with imperial history, as if both existed still within living memory.

In a rather more populist vein, perhaps, but no less sincere in its admiration for Wales’s Roman past, is the work of A. G. Prys-Jones (1888–1987), whose collections of verse were published from the 1920s to the 1940s and became popular as texts taught in schools.

Certainly, the poetry encourages a strong cultural nationalism and provides a way in to Wales's distinctive history, with its references to the Saxons, the Norman settlements, and the medieval Welsh freedom-fighters, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd and Owain Glyndŵr.<sup>8</sup> One of the early poems, 'A Song of the Welsh', published as part of a collection in 1923, gives a potted history of the entire nation from the coming of the Romans—'the fangs of the terrible legions tore red wounds in Mona's side'—to the heroism of Welsh soldiers at Ypres and Mametz Wood in the First World War (Prys-Jones 1923, 8).

Despite this image of the 'terrible legions', reminiscent of Geoffrey of Monmouth's hostility towards the invading Romans, Prys-Jones is ready to acknowledge what they did for Wales, which was to provide the nation with its own place in imperial history. Though the Romans invaded Wales, they left a legacy of technology and international vision which lifted Wales out of its primitive past and imbued it with a sense of nationhood. In a word, the Romans brought civilisation to Wales.

Prys-Jones's engagement with the Roman past of Wales includes a poem about Caerleon called 'To Valeria (A Roman Lady Buried at Caerleon during the Roman Occupation of Britain)'.<sup>9</sup> Designed to capture the historical imagination of young people, the poem speculates that Valeria may have been homesick for Rome but then insists that she was entirely won over by the ancient mysteries of early Wales whose marvels would long outlive those of Rome:

Nay—but I think that long before you went  
On that lone journey which is last of all,  
In this far land new marvels held you thrall  
Beneath these olden hills in golden Gwent:  
For, by the murmurous banks of silver Usk,

<sup>8</sup> Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (d. 1282) was the last independent prince of north Wales whose death in battle enabled Edward I to impose English rule over what had been Welsh territories. Owain Glyndŵr (d. c. 1415) led one of the most significant Welsh rebellions against the English crown in 1400–1405.

<sup>9</sup> Prys-Jones was writing after the first antiquarian excavations at Caerleon in the mid-nineteenth century but before the more professional work done in the 1950s and later. For the antiquarian revival of Caerleon, see Hoselitz (2007, 81–94); for later excavations, see Brewer (2004).

You heard upon the dim, fay-haunted dusk  
Strange melodies and sweet [...]

Of peoples countless as the ocean sands  
Arising from these shadowy forest-lands,  
And great sea-captains and grave lords and kings,  
And poets with their strange imaginings,  
And mighty cities—miracles to come  
When Rome, your splendid mother, would be dumb.  
(Prys-Jones 1923, 6)

This is an ambitious claim, that post-Roman Wales would emerge as greater than Rome itself, and it is hard to avoid reading it as something of an anti-Catholic statement, but the wider purpose of the poem, as with all of Prys-Jones's poetry for young people, is to encourage national pride in the history of Wales and its eventual triumph over the invaders of the past. Caerleon's symbolic function as an echo of Rome itself, just as Geoffrey of Monmouth imagined it, is revived here in an act of conscious nostalgia. It is the place where Roman imperialism gives birth to Welsh nationhood, eliding English domination and providing a collective memory of the greatness of Wales's past.

Alongside this romantic recovery of Roman Wales as part of its modern cultural identity stands the old association of Arthur with Caerleon, an association hinted at by David Jones and invoked more explicitly by the Welsh-language poet T. Gwynn Jones (1871–1949). Himself a professional medievalist, T. Gwynn Jones drew on the imagery of the Welsh past to claim an authenticity for Welsh writing that was beginning to be challenged by Welsh writing in English coming mainly from the industrial centres of the south east.

The Romans, Arthur and Merlin all appear in the early poetry of T. Gwynn Jones, who follows Geoffrey of Monmouth in depicting the Romans as an invading enemy, like the Saxons after them, and Caradog and Arthur as the British kings who resist them. T. Gwynn Jones's powerful narrative poem, 'Ymadawiad Arthur', 'The Passing of Arthur', published in 1910, was based on the poem of the same

name by Alfred Tennyson.<sup>10</sup> The main event of the poem is the dying Arthur's request to his knight, Bedwyr, to return his sword Caledfwlch to the lake from which it came. Twice Bedwyr fails at the task, unable to throw such a richly embellished and culturally freighted sword into the lake; on the third attempt, urged on by an increasingly emotional Arthur, Bedwyr hurls the sword into the lake, and an arm, 'clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful', as Tennyson says, emerges from the lake to catch it and take it under the water. Bedwyr reports back to the failing Arthur:

"Ba ryw antur fu, Bedwyr?" ebr yntau  
Yn wannach ei lais gan nych ei loesau;  
"Dyred, byr fyddo d'eiriau, a dywed  
Im rhag fy myned gan fyrred f'oriau."

Eb Bedwyr: "Arglwydd, llyma ddigwyddodd;  
Y llain a dewlais; llaw wen a'i daliodd;  
Trithro yn hy fe'i chwyfiodd, heb ballu,  
Ac yna'i dynnu i'r eigion danodd."  
(Jones 1910, 15)

"What kind of adventure was there, Bedwyr?", [Arthur] said, weaker his voice from the torment of his pains; "Come, let your words be brief, and tell me before I depart, so short are my hours."

Bedwyr said: "Lord, here is what happened; I threw the sword; a white hand took it; brandished it boldly three times without fail, and then pulled it into the depths beneath."

This is the answer that Arthur has been waiting for, and now he asks Bedwyr to carry him down to the ship that is waiting to take him to Avalon. A scene of enchantment follows, as the metre changes from the dialogic stanzas of *englynion* in which Arthur and Bedwyr exchanges verses to a *cywydd* of description:

Rhodio ar ei hyd yr oedd  
Firain ferched niferoedd;

<sup>10</sup> Tennyson's poem, 'The Passing of Arthur', was published in *The Holy Grail and Other Poems* (1870) as part of a sequence of four Arthurian poems. The section of the poem describing Bedivere's throwing of the sword and Arthur's passing to the ship was first published separately under the title 'Morte D'Arthur' and was the earliest of Tennyson's Arthurian poems, published in *Poems* of 1842.

Mor wych ei drych edrychai  
 Pob un â phob rhyw fun fâi  
 Laned ei gwedd, pan lenwynt  
 Byrth y gaer yn Arberth gynt,  
 Neu ban, bryd hedd, bâi wledd lon  
 I'r lluoedd yng Nghaer Lleon.  
 (Jones 1910, 16)

Walking upon [the ship] were hosts of beautiful women; each one's appearance looked as excellent as all the maidens who were so pure in state, when the portals of the fortress in Arberth once were filled, or when, with peaceful purpose, there was a cheerful feast for the hosts in Caer Leon.

At the moment of Arthur's passing to the otherworld, the poet reminds us of Arthur's glory in his Welsh courts, at Arberth in Dyfed (modern Narberth) and at Caerleon where the great feast was held to celebrate his kingship. The symbolic function of Caerleon as the centre of empire is here strikingly restored, transcending the mundane reality of Caerleon as it was described by Bradley only five years earlier, in order to invoke a collective memory of what Wales once was.

Despite a certain debt to Tennyson, and indirectly to Thomas Malory, for the events described in this poem, T. Gwynn Jones decisively reclaims Arthur and his men, particularly Bedwyr, Tennyson's Bedivere, as authentic Welsh heroes. Even Arthur's sword, Caledfwlch, has its own name from Welsh legend, not the Excalibur of the English tradition.<sup>11</sup> Both Malory and Tennyson refer to Caerleon in their work as one of Arthur's courts, but not in the context of Arthur's death. In Tennyson's final poem from *Idylls of the King*, 'The Passing of Arthur', it is Camelot, not Caerleon, that Bedivere recalls as the scene of Arthur's greatest triumphs. This reference to Caerleon in T. Gwynn Jones's poem is entirely original, and part of his evocation of Arthur as a specifically Welsh king whose courts were in Wales and whose great gathering at Caerleon marked a

<sup>11</sup> Arthur's sword, called 'Caliburnus' by Geoffrey of Monmouth (later 'Excalibur' in French sources), is called 'Caledfwlch' (literally, 'hard gap' or 'hard cleaving') in a number of early Welsh sources, including the prose tale *Culhwch ac Olwen*, dating from the late eleventh century. For useful discussions, see Koch (2006); Sims-Williams (2011, 165–166).



direct connection between the Romans, the British, and the Welsh who are their true descendants in Britain. This is the same connection made by David Jones when he claimed that ‘of all the peoples of this island the Welsh alone afford a direct link with that late-Roman world from within whose crumbling imperium they emerged’ (D. Jones 1978, 115).

## CONCLUSION

Caerleon exemplifies the kind of work that poets and writers make specific places do for them; they make them carry the weight of history, identity, and cultural memory. What literary texts can do is not simply mirror reality—in fact no text can do that—but rather create and imagine a number of realities and the emotions that are associated with them. The paradox inherent in the town of Caerleon has made it a focus of literary reference and metaphor in both Wales and England from the twelfth to the twentieth century. Caerleon is a monumental town, in the literal sense that it has visible remnants of Roman occupation, and in the figurative sense whereby its monuments evoke a nostalgia for an imperial past, claimed by Welsh and English alike as the source of their own histories and identities. These cultural memories transcend a present in which Caerleon exists as a small market town on the March of Wales bearing the traces of its long ownership and exploitation by the English.

Literary responses to Caerleon by both Welsh and English writers have been largely romantic, seeing within it the dual heritage of Arthur and the Romans which form part of the origin myth of empire. From the English colonial perspective of Tennyson and Bradley, a view inherited indirectly from the Norman writer Geoffrey of Monmouth, Caerleon bears witness to a Roman imperialism inherited by the kings of England. For twentieth-century writers in Wales, Caerleon signifies an imperial centre within Wales itself, standing for an authentic Britishness that pre-exists English colonisation. Whether written from a Welsh or English perspective, modern literary texts about Caerleon articulate an overwhelming sense of loss; despite its heritage of Arthurian imperialism, Caerleon’s Roman ruins can

scarcely transcend the reality of another kind of ruin, the scars of modern industrialism still evident in the landscape of south Wales.

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